

GREAT WONDERS – PACIFIC OCEAN DIVISION

By Patrick Bray

Far East District

Kunsan Air Base is an isolated U.S. Air Force installation in South Korea about 150 miles south of Seoul. It is almost completely surrounded by rice paddies except for a seawall along the west boundary. The off-post shopping, recreation, and entertainment districts that are common outside of U.S. military installations worldwide never materialized at this base. The closest major city is not much more than a large village, and it's far from the base.

So Kunsan Air Base is one of the most secluded of all U.S. installations in Korea, and is one of the longest-standing remote assignments in the Air Force.

"I've been stationed at Osan Air Base, Camp Humphreys, and now I'm stationed down here and you can see the difference," said Master Sgt. Marc Walton of the Kunsan Housing Office, which manages housing services for everybody on the base, from the wing commander down. At this base, unlike other places in U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), all personnel are required to live on-post.

"There's not a lot of infrastructure around here to support this base," Walton said.

During the 1990s and in 2005 the base was under consideration for closure by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission. It is now off the BRAC list, but not a lot of money has been invested in Kunsan during the past decade. Now a major Air Force objective is to make the base an assignment of choice by giving airmen a better quality of life.

Part of that objective will become reality later this year with the addition of two modern dormitories built by Far East District (FED) for unaccompanied airmen.

The larger of the two new dormitories will also be the largest housing facility in USFK when it is completed in November. Many members of FED's Kunsan Resident Office call it "the "hotel" because of its size and amenities. In fact, it has been compared to the Dragon Hill Lodge, an Armed Forces Recreation Center in Seoul.

The other dormitory under construction on the same campus is a 160-bedroom, five-story facility with modern Air Force standard living modules. It has an estimated completion date for September.

Once completed, both dormitories will become a part of a campus joining two other high-rise dormitories completed in 2007 and 2008. All together, the campus will have 1,360 modern bedrooms for airmen.

The two new dormitories are a culmination of an FED design and construction quality project that incorporated best industry practices.

"A lot of lessons learned during years of designing and building Air Force dormitories were implemented in the new projects," said Andy Hirano, formerly FED's project manager for the dormitories, and now Air Force program manager at Pacific Ocean Division. "FED ensured that their contractors were set up for success by incorporating continuous process improvements."

Lessons learned and suggestions for improvement from previous dormitory projects were passed on to contractors, who then increased efficiency, raised construction quality and avoided pitfalls.

"The Corps of Engineers' designers paid particular attention to detail in the interior and exterior features, such as better soundproofing to keep out jet engine noise, and granite building wainscots to prevent accumulation of dirt and mud on the building skirt," Hirano said. "These types of features make dormitories pleasant to live in and a welcome place to return after a hard day's work."

Under the construction contract awarded to Lotte Construction and Engineering, older dormitories will be demolished. These older facilities do not meet current standards of four-plus-one style modules where each airman has a bedroom and a private bathroom.

“With about 100 percent annual turnover in personnel, there is accelerated wear and tear on old living conditions at Kunsan,” said Kim, who is familiar with the products that the Air Force wants. “Some facilities are more than 20 years old and do not provide individuals with privacy essential for proper rest and relaxation.”

Air Force enlisted personnel are thrilled about the addition of these new dormitories, which are expected to advance quality of life at the base by leaps and bounds.

Walton also serves as chief of the Capital Asset Management Element at the Kunsan Housing Office and is familiar with how airmen feel about their current housing. As part of his responsibilities, Walton supervises dormitory managers to facilitate needs of airmen living in the dormitories.

“When you talk about the dormitories, the new quad configuration, those airmen are satisfied, but it’s the older dormitories that we’re having issues with, and that’s due to the infrastructure,” Walton said. “With the new dormitories coming online, I think a lot of discontent would be eliminated.”

According to Walton, about 2,000 airmen at the base are authorized to live in the quad-type housing under construction. With the additional 688 bedrooms soon to be available and existing modern standard dorm rooms, only a small percentage of airmen will still live in older dormitories.

“Some older dormitories have been renovated to a certain standard, but not all of them,” Walton said. “The older constructs go back to the old two-plus-two style where it was two rooms that would house two individuals each, and they all shared a bathroom. We have the one-plus-one style with two individual bedrooms, each housing one airman, and they share a kitchenette and a single bathroom.”

Unfortunately, many airmen currently stationed at Kunsan Air Base will not benefit from the new dormitories because they will rotate back to the U.S. before the 160-room dormitory opens in September, and the 528-room dormitory in late fall. Until then, housing at the base is at 104 percent capacity, which means that some airmen share bedrooms that are outside current Air Force standards.

“We got a waiver until we get the new buildings online,” Walton said. “We can double-up up to E-5, but we haven’t had to. E-4 and below are the only ones being doubled-up currently.”

The living quarters that are doubled-up are the ones slated to move into the new dormitories once they open.

“All of the airmen will be in the newer dormitories and some of the noncommissioned officers, but everyone else will be single occupied,” Walton said. “If it is a room where it is a shared bathroom, then there will be only one individual in each room.”

In addition to comfort and privacy, safety is another important objective in quality of life. Each floor has reinforced concrete foundations, floor slabs and walls, as well as fire alarms, sprinklers with fire detectors and antiterrorism protection measures. Kunsan Air Base’s anti-terrorism/force protection officer has determined that the project complies with current AT/FP criteria, which are mandatory for all Air Force dormitory projects funded in 2004 and later.

The environment also played a major factor in the project. It is Air Force policy to “build green” on all projects. FED built the dormitories with energy efficient systems and used low volatile organic chemical paints, finishes, carpets and wood. FED also required good indoor air quality during construction, used regional materials, reduced potable water consumption and diverted demolition products from the landfill.

As a result of FED’s “green” efforts, these new dormitories will be Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certifiable.

FED used safe construction practices in both projects. Work on the 528-room dormitory began Feb. 15, 2008 and work on the 160-bedroom dormitory began Nov. 3, 2008. Since work began on both projects, zero accidents have been reported and no lost time due to accidents.

The design of the dormitories being built by FED at Kunsan Air base was recognized by the Air Force for its superb quality.

“A series of dormitories at Kunsan Air Base...was nominated by Pacific Air Forces for the PACAF Facility Design Awards program,” Hirano said. “Such honor is a credit to Far East District’s ability to efficiently deliver effective design and construction to the Air Force.”